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# An American "Schwester"

KATHERINE M. VOLK





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# An American "Schwester"

Some few personal experiences.

By Katherine M. Volk

PRESS OF  
THE E. S. SCHULTE PRINTING CO  
CLEVELAND, O.

II 640  
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Dedicated to  
The friends of my childhood  
who were "friends indeed".

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~~\$ 0.50~~  
DEC -6 1916

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no. 1.



## Preface



THIS little booklet is the result of requests to tell the same story over and over again. At the suggestion of very dear friends and with their assistance as well as that of my sister Mary this story will go on it's way giving an intimate view of the individual and "patient" soldier.

How human, and like the rest of us he is after all!

Every detail of this story is true and I have always considered it a great privilege to have been of some small service to those who needed it so badly. The tale is told without claiming any literary merits but only wishing for the prayers of the people that the war soon ceases.



## An American "Schwester"



GET ready to leave for Europe tomorrow," was the message that greeted my ears over the telephone.

A week later, one hundred and sixty graduate nurses and thirty surgeons boarded the American Red Cross ship in the Hudson River. These were the sole passengers on this unique ship dedicated to a no less unique mission.

We remained in this beautiful harbor for a week with all on board and finally sailed the thirteenth of September, nineteen hundred and fourteen. Craft of every sort gave us salute, tugs, ships, and pleasure boats vying with one another to greet us first. Some blew whistles, and those that were large enough to carry a flag solemnly dipped it as we passed by. That we were on a serious mission we knew, but this farewell impressed its character still more deeply. Coney Island with its gay and

glaring lights was left behind, and then New Jersey, from its highland light, flashed a beacon toward us far and long, as if wishing to light our way.

Rear Admiral Ward of the United States joined us at Falmouth, England, and took command of the expedition. There, in the midst of many other ships and many other flags did we begin to realize the significance of our own Stars and Stripes, and we felt a certain comfort in being sheltered under them. Another week was spent at Falmouth in making further arrangements for our safety as a neutral ship in various ports of the warring countries. Shore leave was given us and we eagerly took advantage of the opportunity to see that quaint sea-port. We attracted as much attention in our uniforms as any group of soldiers, and a tiny lad of about six years gave us the soldiers salute. This was an initiation. Even though we were in honor bound not to seem curious, or to commit ourselves in any way

concerning the war, we could not avoid hearing the English side. Remarks were continually being made and one elderly lady said to us, "Of course you really belong to us anyway, you know."

The voyage in the English Channel and North Sea was not without its thrilling sights. The lonely body of a dead sailor came floating by face down in the chill water. Fifteen torpedo boats were counted on the horizon at one time in plain sight. They saw us too, and one of them dashed up to us to investigate. It was soon satisfied. There was constant danger of striking a mine in this region even after we had taken on a pilot who knew as well as any other where they were located. No one seemed alarmed, but all were perhaps a little subdued until we reached the land of the wooden shoe where, at Rotterdam, the voyage ended, the first week of October. Then while we were still drawing the first long breaths of relief, sounds were heard, faint and far

away but unmistakable. It was the bombardment of Antwerp. A few days later came the refugees. They poured into little Holland with packs on their backs and with children clinging to their hands. Thousands of children were brought in homeless and alone. They were a forlorn-looking lot, but the people of Rotterdam seemed not to murmur.

A special train took us on into Germany and to Vienna. Those of us who were detailed for service in Budapest went by regular passenger train to our destination. Soldiers fare was handed out to us at nearly every station where they were prepared to care for the military trains going through. Everywhere we stopped, either the first, second, or third class waiting room was turned over to Red Cross service, and sandwiches with hot coffee, tea and sometimes cocoa were given us. At one place a station guard noticed a small American flag that was carried by one of the nurses, and though he could not speak to her she soon un-

derstood that he wished to have it. She handed it to him as the train was pulling out and we saw him kiss it fervently. Words were not necessary for we understood.

At Berlin we were received and entertained by our Ambassador and his wife. At Breslau a banquet was waiting for us and we were requested to sing "America." Surely there were few foreigners who would have dared to sing a national song as we did in that country. Our destination was reached at last. By this time only thirteen nurses and three surgeons were left, the number detailed for Budapest.

A large new building which had been occupied by the blind was vacated for our use and it was soon turned into a battle field, a battle field for life and not for death. Forty-two patients arrived with the first transport assigned to us. How grateful they were to get into beds and sleep! Two days later thirty-seven more came. The wounds of most of them had gone for several days with-

out being dressed after the first aid. All were therefore in a very bad condition and to describe them would mean leading you into the worst imaginable scenes of gangrene and deformity. The men were all more or less emaciated because of the inability to supply the human body with the ordinary needs of civilization, while living or existing in trenches. Sometimes the snow was too deep or the mud too thick to get the proper amount of food to the regiments. Even when admitted to our hospital the men would cling to a loaf of rye bread with a tenacity that only one who has known hunger could show. Such young, patient, grateful men they were! One of them was told that his feet were so badly frozen that amputation would be necessary in order to save his life. His consent was given, but he seemed most concerned about his mother, repeating to the nurse in German "Please don't tell my mother, will you?" Upon regaining consciousness when it was all over, he said,



“You didn’t tell my mother, did you?” The nurse, of course, had not seen her and so could answer in the negative.

To be a trained nurse does not mean to be unmindful of or to be unimpressed by the patient’s awful condition, especially when dressing wounds so large that one can bury a hand in them. A nurse must not allow the patient to think that she is alarmed or that she considers him critically ill; she may act unconcerned and yet feel such sympathy that she sheds tears where he can not see them.

The Carpathian Mountains, where there is intense cold as early as October, were responsible for many victims who were suffering from frost. These were kept in the hospital nearly all winter. Some lost both feet; others more fortunate but not fortunate enough, lost only part of a foot or a few of their toes. We could not replace toes or feet but we did all that was possible to assist nature in healing the maimed parts.

One wounded German gave me a post card that he had in his hip pocket at the time the bullet struck him. It had gone through the card leaving a hole on its way.

A Roumanian Hungarian Gypsy with a severe shrapnel face-wound told us that he was left behind to die because he would be of no use to the military again if he did live. He crawled on his hands and knees for about three miles and then was sent on to the hospital where we found that not only the greater part of one cheek, but also part of his nose, had been shot away. He was only twenty-two, and had beautiful big brown eyes that seemed to express all that he could not say with his mutilated face. Cases like his are not sent back to the army because they are too depressing to the others. Story after story similar to this could be related without exaggeration, but it would be too heartbreaking. All that is left for us to do is to hope and pray that the war will soon cease.

The Austrians and Hungarians who

could speak German always said "Kissa de handt," and sometimes suited the action to the word. Those who were able to be on their feet gave us the soldier's salute and were very courteous. As they regained health and strength we could not feel that they were looking forward with that joy which other patients know. They were soldiers, and complete recovery meant another trip to the battle-field and another possibility of being brought to the hospital. A man may be in duty bound to go when his country calls him, but nature turns him toward his family, which he must leave behind to work out its own salvation.

Among my patients was a stalwart Austrian, a medical case. He had not been in the hospital very long when he was pronounced cured. It was three days before Christmas, and the prospect of going home for that day made him the happiest of all in that ward of thirty men. He seemed to bubble over with joy, and one night as I was going off duty he stood



SOLDIERS' CHRISTMAS IN THE HOSPITAL

up before them all and sang a solo. His deep rich voice was such a treat to hear! And his act was so easy and spontaneous! The time came for him to go, and he donned his uniform. As he waited with other soldiers for the final word, the military authorities told him that no more furloughs were granted and that he must return to the front without going home. His large fine frame shook with sobs and no one could help him.

Discharging a soldier was not always the last that was heard of him, for many of them wrote to us later. For instance, a twenty-seven year old Bohemian sent a card telling of his condition.

He had been treated in the hospital after a bullet had gone through the front of his cap fracturing the bridge of his nose. Many times a day did the nurse syringe the nasal canals to keep them free from pus which had begun to form before he reached us. Owing to the discharge and infection of the wound the sight of one of his eyes was impaired. He wrote on the

card, "You may not remember me or my name, but you would surely remember my nose if you saw it." There was no doubt as to the identity of the writer.

The question has often been asked, "How did you understand them, how could you speak to them? It is true that the American Red Cross nurses could not speak all of the languages of those who came under their care. For instance, there would be side by side, perhaps, a man who spoke only Slavish, and a Roumanian, and a a Bosnian from near Turkey, and a Hungarian whose home was near Italy, and whose language was Italian. Many a Pole and Croat knew only the language of his own locality. The language problem was not the only one that had to be dealt with, but they all added interest to the work. We had two interpreters who spoke several languages, and the patients helped one another as well. Those who had any education at all almost always spoke two languages, and often more. Some of the nurses

were fortunate enough to speak German and all studied some Hungarian. This afforded a great deal of amusement. Any effort to speak their native tongue pleased the people and seemed to arouse their admiration. Someone somewhere was always acting as teacher or pupil in the study of Hungarian, German or English.

A fine little Austrian from Bohemia who was in the hospital for some time with rheumatism and a bad heart was very anxious to learn English. He said he had a brother in Texas whom he hoped to join as soon as the war was over. This young chap was pale and aenemic. His eyes looked so large and appealing that one could not help being patient with him nor refuse to teach him whatever he wished. So whenever there was a spare moment he would write sentences and tell what they were in German and I would translate and write them for him in English. After several weeks, during which little improvement was visible, he was discharged and sent to a convalescent

hospital, where, we hope, he made more rapid strides to recovery. Henry, for that was the lad's name, was only one example of what happens to many bright young lives. Complete recovery could be looked for only where attention could be given to every detail, and only after a protracted convalescence.

Two men lay side by side in the ward, each with his right leg in a plaster cast. While patiently waiting for the bones to knit they became the best of comrades and one of them always did the interpreting in German for the other Hungarian who was limited to one language. Nothing was too much trouble for No. 17 to do for No. 16. No. 17 told the story of what had happened at the time he was wounded. Several soldiers, he said, were in a tent engaged in various occupations, when suddenly a terrific noise was heard. It was the explosion of a shrapnel just above them. After the excitement was over they found one of their companions in his former sitting



posture, face turned upward, without a sign of a wound, but dead.

To speak English to a new transport was usually of no avail. As time was an important factor in caring for so many at once, the doctor, while dressing the wounds of a certain patient, essayed him in all the languages that he had used in speaking to the others. This soldier seemed uncommonly stupid and did not reply until he discovered what the doctor was trying to say, when he answered in perfect English, "It doesn't pain very much." He later told us that he had been in America for several years and had there acquired his knowledge of English. The United States is always spoken of in Europe as America. If all the soldiers come to America at the close of the war that said they would, few men will be left in the old country.

One poor fellow who had a complex fracture was also suffering from tetanus. I was detailed to "special" him, which permitted me to spend considerable time working over him.

Thus it was discovered during his rational periods that he had been in America six years, and was able to understand and speak our language quite well. This information was passed on to the doctor who was somewhat surprised, for the patient had been with us for several days and had scarcely seemed able to say anything even in his own tongue. When the doctor made his rounds next time he said to the patient, "How do you feel?" and he replied with difficulty, but plainly, "Sick." He died a few days later.

Scabo, otherwise known as No. 83, was a patient in ward eight and bed number three. His long confinement to his bed made him well known, and his patience was exemplary. His wife often visited him in the hospital. On one of her visits he asked her to bring a bouquet of flowers for the nurses; at another time he noticed that one of the attendants was suffering with a headache, and asked the nurse to give him some medicine. We looked at each other and smiled



A VISIT FROM THE FAMILY

at the thoughtfulness of this dying man.

Men who were not physically able to go to the front were made to do military duty in other ways. Thus it happened that there was a father serving as an attendant while his son was a patient in the hospital. Each seemed quite contented, even though the son had a bad deep wound just below the heart which kept discharging for several months after he was injured. He looked so well and able bodied when up and dressed that no one would have suspected the terrible wound concealed beneath his uniform.

Among the men doing military duty as attendants were actors, dancing masters, photographers, a jockey and others of various vocations. This made it difficult for them to act as orderlies to the patients, and it also increased the nurses' task of directing. With perseverance and by maintaining a strict professional attitude, however, we succeeded in gaining and holding

the respect of the man in the bed as well as that of all others. It also took some time for the officials of the military to accept us as skilled professional women, and to accord us the positions due to our ability and training. Several weeks of faithful duty, however, left no question in their minds and our standing was assured. The loyalty of the patients to us was felt by the officials and by the many visitors who found our hospital an interesting place. A Greek Catholic Bishop who had made the rounds one morning conversing with them in their own languages, afterwards said he asked them how they liked the American nurses, and they replied, "They are angels." Incidents of this kind were some of the compensations that we had for our labor and they helped to smooth our way.

Visitors of many types were continually calling. Princess Augusta often visited the soldiers in the hospital; she gave some of them cards, and here and there a rosary. Not

uncommonly titled ladies would pass cigarettes to the patients. One Hungarian lady made herself quite useful by writing cards for those who were not able to do so. This pleased them very much.

Nelly Bly, the war correspondent, was also one of our visitors. I had been speaking to her for a few minutes, though I did not know who she was, when I exclaimed, "My, how pleasant it seems to hear someone outside of our own little circle speak good American English." She laughed and said she didn't know just how good her English was. Later she left Budapest and went to Serbia, but she called again on her return and gave us a description of what she found. It was our good fortune to meet many interesting characters, some of them all the more interesting because of the positions in which they were found, such as the president of one of the largest torpedo factories in the world, acting as a secretary to the American Red Cross Military Hospital. He was

under the surveillance of the Hungarian officials, because he was an Englishman and a prisoner of war. The factory was located in Fiume, Hungary. At the outbreak of the war this president, Mr. A. E. Jones, was imprisoned for two months and then allowed his liberty on condition that he report regularly without fail to the police. Mr. Jones said he had lived in Hungary no less than twenty-eight years and had many friends among the Hungarians. Nevertheless, he is a prisoner, and his invalid wife at home is awaiting the end of the war with the hope that it will bring her husband back to her in England. He was a friend of the nurses. Any service he could render them gave him pleasure. So he was frequently called upon to do little errands. He never refused, whether it was to take a roll of kodak films to be developed or to buy some little delicacy. He invited us out to dinner at different times in small groups, and during a conversation he was asked what he would do if Budapest

were taken by the Russians. He very promptly replied that he would "Treat the Russian General to champagne." That was another light on the subject. When we sang "America" he joined us and he sang "God Save the King." Probably the only place in that country where he could take that liberty was under the American flag.

Many strange domestic complications arose from this awful war. A fine Hungarian officer who called upon us frequently was parted from his wife and child who were in England. Because his wife was an English woman she dared not make the trip to be with her husband. In one of the homes where we were welcome guests the wife of the artist had a sister whose husband was French, while the sister herself was German. Within the very building which we were using, a small blind boy was still housed whose parents were in America and unable to get back to claim him. Other children of the institution were taken to their homes. Two



Irish lads who were medical students in civil life were doing duty in a hospital there in Budapest, while being held as prisoners. A Boer from Africa, who, as an English subject, was also a prisoner of war, was employed by the Hungarian military to act as interpreter for us. When he learned that I was about to leave the country for home, he asked me to mail a few letters for him to his wife. He had not heard from her and believed that his mail was being held. I consented readily at first, but after thinking it over and realizing his position and mine, I told him I could not do so. Knowing that we were considered guests of the Hungarian country and were treated as such, it would be taking undue advantage of our privileges.

When possible amusements were provided for the soldiers in the hospital. A gypsy band played for them on our American Thanksgiving Day and the strains were carried through the corridors into the different wards. The music gave them something else

to think of, at least for the time being. Singers and elocutionists also gave their services. Many of the patients were able to leave their beds and gather around the stairway and in the halls, where they showed their appreciation of the entertainment. A retired prima donna who lives in Buda, sang for the soldiers only. She invited our American girls to tea in her home, which is said to be the richest in the city. She seemed to have there all that heart could desire. Among her treasures were sixty-five kinds of musical instruments of different countries. Another home where we were welcomed was across the Danube on the Buda side. It was built on the hill, whence there was a wide and beautiful view overlooking the river and Pest beyond.

Life in the hospital was not all shadow. We had many sunny moments, and one of the brightest was when the Austro-Hungarian Government decorated us with silver medals for Red Cross War Services. The

presentation was accompanied by considerable ceremony and a spirit of good fellowship. A certificate bearing the signature of Franz Salvator was given with the decoration to each member of the Unit. We would have been quite content without this special recognition, which was a pleasant surprise. In contrast to this scene was the death of a fine large German officer at the very hour in the room beyond. Only two days before I had been chatting with him while he was eating his supper. He spoke of his wife and children whom he was looking forward to seeing in the near future. I told him of my plan to leave for America soon, and he smilingly promised to go on the same train with me as far as his home. No one knew then that the gas gangrene bacilli were already lodged in his system and would do their deadly work so soon.

The moments were few in which we did not see or hear the results of the carnage that was being wrought without any apparent signs of ceas-

ing. Nearly any time of the day, by looking out of the window, in the front of the hospital, we could see train after train of box cars going by filled with troops. As soon as the soldiers caught sight of our flag and the Red Cross beside it, they always cheered and shouted as only hosts of men could. To us this significant sound became a very familiar one. When the trains did not carry human loads they were carrying cannon, automobile trucks, and other military requirements. This kept up not only through the day, but through the night as well. The capacity of the box cars was limited to eight horses or forty soldiers. The doors of the cars were always crowded by the poor fellows who enjoyed the very sight of the Stars and Stripes. How many of them never came back we did not know. They were on their way.

March first came and my sister and I left for home, the United States. Surely a more cosmopolitan group seldom before met at a depot

to say farewell to two American girls. Baron Popper and Major Sarmy, two Hungarian officials, were there, besides the two English prisoners of war, two of our American doctors, and many of our nurses. All were bound together by the common interest of the wounded soldier. Our passage was engaged on an Italian steamer which sailed from Naples on the seventeenth of March. My sister and I thought we would attempt a trip into Germany. Some said, "You had better not try it," since the train accommodations and schedules were most uncertain. On into southern Germany we went, however, through Salzburg at the border of Austria and Germany, through Munich, stopping there six hours, and down to Ulm. We changed trains at Ulm, waiting an hour. All seemed well so far and no great irregularities of any sort were noticed. We had purchased a few postcards and stamps while in Munich, but we failed to post them. They were written in English and addressed to friends in the States. No

sooner were they out of my hands than a policeman appeared and demanded our passports. He examined and gave them back, saying that the stamps on our cards were Bavarian and were worthless there. Besides, the fact that we were on our way to another city was of itself a ground of suspicion. He inquired where we were going and how long we expected to stay in Germany. He apologized when he heard our answers, and permitted us to go on. Seven o'clock the same evening found us in the small town of Sigmaringen Hohenzollern, named for its castle which is still in use. The present Kaiser's family came from there. We stayed there from Wednesday until Sunday without being disturbed or seeing any signs of warfare other than those which in other cities had become familiar to us. Soldiers in uniform were on the streets and were also doing duty as railroad station guards. Some were from hospitals, the attendants always wearing the soldiers' uniform. Patients too were often

seen on the streets with arms in slings and with heads in bandages. In the stations of the larger cities the departure of soldiers was a common sight. Gray-haired parents were battling with their emotions. The mother's tears would fall and gain a victory over every effort to smile as she waved to her own. The train rolled relentlessly on to give up its charge to the military, whose power is similarly cold and great.

Zurich, Switzerland, was our immediate destination. Two changes of train were scheduled for us. Three would be necessary we were told after we started. Six is what we finally had to make in order to reach Zurich the same day. This lead us to give up our suitcases and check them. The minute we checked our baggage the station guard asked to see our passports. After he had held them for a time, staring blankly, I asked him to hand them back, knowing the priceless value of those bits of paper. Another more intelligent looking official next demanded them. He

seemed to comprehend them and allowed us to proceed. This was not for long, however. The next episode of the day must be credited to the inspection officers at Schaffhausen, on the border between Germany and Switzerland. Here we were requested to get off the train because our passports were not up to the minute. The new issue required a declaration on the passports stating the destination of the traveler. Our passports were minus this information, though we had called on the consul of Germany at Budapest, as well as on our American consul to have them examined. We also very innocently had committed another crime. Sealed letters were found in our possession, which had been given us to mail by soldiers. This made them very suspicious and the officer commanded us to burn the letters immediately, before his very eyes. This, of course, we did, although not before he tried to read them—one was written in Polish. We were taken into a small room at the rail-



road station, of which the only other occupants were a dozen or more soldiers on duty. If we had not been dealing with soldiers all winter we might have felt somewhat alarmed, but as it was we knew them to be quite human. The officer suggested that it might be necessary to detain us all night in that strange place, in charge of the military. I asked if he could not telephone or telegraph to some other authority. This he finally did, and after demanding to know how much gold we had in our possession, he allowed us to go on the next train. We took our bag and baggage and left Gottmandingen, feeling it a relief to get away from the military authorities, especially as it was dark and we were the only women. An unfriendly feeling toward Americans was evident.

A different atmosphere was felt as soon as we reached Switzerland, and it seemed good not to be looked upon with suspicion. This was a neutral country, a haven of joy.

## Red Cross Nurses' Commandments\*

I am thy Uncle Sam, who hath brought thee out of the land of the free.

Thou shalt have no other flag before thee, false impressions, or any likeness of anything which is uncensored, news from the wireless above, the earth, or the cables beneath the waters.

Thou shalt not bow down thyself, to any one country, nor serve them, for I, thy master, thy Uncle Sam, am a jealous Uncle, visiting the iniquities of the nurses upon them who follow, even unto the third and fourth shipment; but giving honor to those who obey my commandments.

Thou shalt not take the name of thy port in vain, for the President, thy ruler, will not hold her guiltless, who betrays her neutrality.

Remember thy training school and keep it honored.

Seven days shalt thou labor and do all thy work. The seventh day is the Sabbath, in it thou shalt labor as strenuously as thou hast during any of the preceding days of the week.

Honor thy country and the Red Cross that thy days may be long in the strange land to which you are sent to succor.

Thou shalt not primp.

Thou shalt not commit any amorous deeds.

Thou shalt not flirt.

Thou shalt not countenance any unkind gossip against one another.

Thou shalt not covet thy sister's good looks. Thou shalt not covet thy sister's admirers, nor her sea-proof stomach, nor her hardtack, nor her knapsack, not anything that is thy sister's.

A. C. L.  
(Copied)

\*Not to be taken seriously.

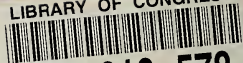








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